

This, That, and Something Else

VI

Whimsical thoughts that will resonate in your heart

By

Purnima L. Toolsidass

This, That, and Something Else

Introduction

This is a collection of assorted articles I wrote for an e- Newsletter edited by Deb Bhattacharya, who took up the task when Br. Brendan MacCarthaigh (a Christian Brother, educationalist and psychiatrist) returned to Ireland after helping innumerable people for some 60 years, mostly in Kolkata. Br. Mac's focus was value education and reducing stress faced by students, which often led to juvenile suicide.

I was asked to contribute articles because of my concern for the cause and my lifetime devotion to animal welfare and spiritual psychology. I am convinced that at the bottom of all strife is a paucity of understanding and/or compassion. These lead to interpersonal tensions and psychological aberrations.

Very often we cannot change the circumstances but we can change our perspective, which helps us to cope with unpleasant situations. This booklet is a collection of some of the articles that came to me from an unseen inner power that I am old-fashioned enough to call 'God'! We can substitute 'God' for 'the Universe', if that appeals more to the reader. The style is light and simple and I feel both confident and diffident when I state that I believe everyone will find something they will enjoy and feel better for having read it.

We all hate the hate that seems to pervade the world. We also feel helpless to do anything about it. Well, I invite you to join me in my simple faith that each of us can do quite a lot to make our little world a bit happier, kinder and more amiable. If the experts are to be believed – and I confess I do believe them – there is a strong link between the microcosm and the macrocosm, so every action of

every individual can contribute to a nicer or nastier world, whether we do things consciously or unconsciously.

This quote, read when I was a little girl, stays in my mind.

‘A smile is quite a funny thing; it wrinkles up your face. And, when it’s gone, you’ll never find its secret hiding place! But far more wonderful it is, to see what a smile can do – you smile at one, he smiles at you, and so one smile makes two!’

Let’s get together and spread smiles, because life is worth the while when you can smile!

Happy reading and all the best!

Purnima L. Toolsidass

September, 2024

Entitlement.

‘What happened?’ asked Shobha. ‘Why didn’t you come yesterday?’

‘Sorry, Shobha,’ said Vinod. ‘I’d gone with my parents on a visit. We came back late. I left my phone at home, so I couldn’t let you know.’

Shobha was not appeased. ‘We waited and waited!’ she grumbled. ‘Why did you have to stay on with your parents? Wasn’t it boring?’

‘Oh, come on, Shobha!’ said Anjali. ‘Yesterday is gone! Why create an issue over it?’

‘That’s Shobha for you!’ grinned Nikhil. ‘She always turns an incident into an episode!’

The friends laughed. Shobha looked somewhat abashed. ‘Well, things do matter to me,’ she said. ‘I feel I am entitled to consideration from my friends.’

‘Ah! Now you’re talking!’ said Vinod. ‘Talking of entitlement, look what I’ve brought!’ He took a folded piece of paper from his pocket and spread it out on the table before them. The others stretched out to see.

‘What is it?’ asked Anjali.

‘This is what delayed me,’ said Vinod. ‘And, no, Shobha, I wasn’t bored at all! We had gone for the ninetieth birthday celebration of my father’s close friend’s father. Our families have been close since I was a young boy in shorts. We used to be neighbours in Nagpur and practically lived in each other’s houses. I’m very fond of the old man, and I was glad to go.’

‘And, you didn’t even think that we’d be waiting, I suppose?’ Shobha couldn’t resist the jibe.

‘Oh, shut up!’ said Vinod impatiently. ‘See this – I copied it down from the old man’s poster because I liked it very much.’

‘Let’s read it first,’ said Anjali. ‘Nikhil, why don’t you read it out? It’ll be easier that way.’

Nikhil was good at elocution. He read beautifully. This is what was written

Entitlement.

Every human being is entitled to –

- Seek for happiness, but not at the cost of somebody else’s happiness.
- Eat good food, but not if the food is harmful for him.
- Go on a holiday, but not one that leaves you more exhausted than when you started
- Ask your parents for what you need, but not luxuries they can ill afford, just because your friends have them.
- A monthly salary, but only if you have worked to earn it.
- Resort to violence, but only in self-defence or protect someone.
- A good friend, but you have to be a good friend, first.
- Choose how to spend your free time, but not justify wasting it.
- Expect courtesy and cooperation, but know that you won’t always get it.
- Achieve great success, but it should be in something admirable.
- Keep a pet, but don’t forget that the pet is entitled to your love and care.
- Love and respect from your family, but only if you respond in kind.
- Crack a joke, but not to lose people’s respect by cracking jokes that are in bad taste.
- Use the bounty of Nature, but by doing minimum harm to the environment.
- Discipline your children, but it would be criminal if you were unreasonable and unduly harsh.

- Hold on to your beliefs, but not to impose them on others.

‘Wow!’ exclaimed Shobha. ‘It’s awesome, Vinod!’

‘Yes, isn’t it?’ asked Vinod. ‘I asked Dadu where he got it from. He said it was given to him by a friend who was in the Army. The gentlemen’s father had given it to him on his twenty first birthday.’

‘Now this is truly a wonderful present to give someone who’s turning twenty one!’ said Anjali. ‘The world needs such values more than ever.’

‘So, am I forgiven, Shobha?’ asked Vinod. Shobha smiled mistily. She didn’t answer, but her adoring look said everything for her.

26th January, 2025

When we begin to grow old we forget.....

- The innocence of childhood.
- The thrill of the first kiss.
- The nervousness of our first interview.
- Our sensitivity to criticism.
- The fire of idealism.
- The inexhaustible energy to 'live it up!'
- The deep sleep of exhaustion.
- The pride of getting our first salary.
- The dissatisfaction with the pocket money that never seemed enough.
- The defiance with which we swallowed the first drink.
- The embarrassment at being complimented.
- The horror of making a faux pas.
- The determination to keep smiling when our shoes pinched.
- The covert glances to see whether our companion was looking at us.
- The effort to pretend to enjoy a party we were longing to get away from.
- The self control we had to practice, to say, 'I'm full' and refuse some tasty food in case someone would think we're greedy.
- The reluctance to leave because Mummy had told me I must be back before midnight.
- The envy we felt when we saw how somebody became the life of the party.
- The way we laughed when someone said something we didn't understand.
- The fact that we were born as a human baby without considerations. Of caste, creed, race or prejudice.

- How much we enjoyed challenges like climbing a tall tree, go up a hill, or bathe in ice-cold water.
- How we longed to be mature and self-confident.
- How we never worried about money.
- How easy it was to eat whatever we wanted without worrying about its effect on our health.
- How we wondered who we would marry, or if we would marry.
- The little things that mean so much.
- The embarrassment when someone cracked a dirty joke.
- How easy it was to cry.
- How easy it was to giggle over silly things.
- How the thought of death never came.
- How natural it was to fight and forgive.
- How every expedition was an adventure.
- How discomforts never mattered when we travelled.
- How easy it was to sympathize with others.
- How natural it was to love the whole world.

29th January, 2025

A Soulful Discussion.

Imagination is an amazing thing – I don’t think even God knows what imagination can bring up! Sitting in a half-asleep state one afternoon, some idle thoughts flitted across my mind. Maybe it was a reflection of my own concerns for the future of our future generations, fostered by my belief in after-life existence and rebirth. Whatever, in hindsight it does seem quite sensible and worth sharing, so here we go – you need not take it seriously if you don’t want to!

A group of effulgent figures gathered around a banyan tree. They had no specific forms or names so I can only call them by letters of the alphabet; they were as difficult to grasp as my first lesson in algebra, and I just listened on.

‘I think drugs are the greatest evil’, said A. ‘Drugs ruin a person’s ability to think, his health and his whole life.’

‘Why do you say “he”’, asked B. ‘There are women who are equally effected, aren’t there?’

‘Sorry, dear,’ answered A. ‘It was just a form of specking. No offence meant.’

‘Oh, stop this bickering!’ said C. ‘No, I don’t think drugs is the biggest problem for the human race; I think its hatred. It’s worse than a drug and more deadly, as well as being more pervasive.’

‘I agree,’ said D. ‘Hatred is spreading like wildfire. People burn within and create havoc for all.’

‘I think selfishness is even worse,’ said E. ‘Selfishness contributes to hatred and every other evil that ruins humanity.’

‘But how can anyone help being selfish?’ asked F. ‘To think about ourselves first is natural. It is inborn in every being.’

‘I think that absence of compassion is at the root of all evil,’ piped up G, who seemed to be more diminutive than the others. E objected,

‘lack of compassion is due to selfishness, so it is selfishness that ought to be our first concern.’

‘Then, how is it that there are so many people who are unselfish and compassionate?’ asked H. ‘What you’ve all been saying is all true, but the fact remains that the miscreants are still fewer in most societies than good people. Else, the world would be Hell!’

‘Thank God for that!’ cried I.

‘Who believes in God anymore?’ asked J

‘Why – all the religious sects that are so pious! Don’t they spread the word of God?’ replied I

‘Ha! Ha! You don’t know the reality!’ mocked J. ‘The religious groups are mostly concerned with their own dogmas and rituals. More and more people are turning atheist because they see the hypocrisy of these so called men of God!’

‘Aren’t you being a big harsh?’ asked H. ‘What about the army of kind-hearted people who just do good to others, without expecting anything in return? What about the true men-of-God, who try to guide people to discriminate between the Truth and mere bigotry?’

‘They are an exception; a small minority. What can they achieve?’

‘Well, what can anyone achieve?’ asked A. ‘We can’t go back and warn the people in the mortal world and they seem determined to do everything that is harmful for them and for the whole world.’

‘We can pray, can’t we?’ demanded K. ‘We never gave importance to prayer when we were in our mortal bodies, but now that we are in our astral bodies, we all know how effective earnest prayer can be!’

‘You are very right,’ said the others. ‘Yes, we have more-or-less wasted our lives when we were in the mortal world. We can certainly make amends now – in fact, we should make amends, only if we do

so to feel better ourselves! Come, let us think of what we will pray for, for those who suffer helplessly all their mortal lives.'

'I will pray that people realize how totally destructive drugs are, and that people stop supplying drugs to weak-minded people,' said A. 'I went through it and I wish I could tell people how bad it is!'

'I will pray that men stop being chauvinistic pigs!' said B. 'All through history men have dominated and bullied women. Now, women are retaliating and that's not good for a conducive relationship. Marriages are breaking up, and the saddest part is the way the children from broken homes go astray. An unhappy childhood is a breeding ground for drugs, hatred, selfishness, lack of compassion, and lack of faith in a benevolent Higher Power. So, I will pray for men and women to give more importance to understanding and mutual consideration. Please God, by the power of my prayer, may families be better bonded and create a new generation that is compassionate and ethically aware, with values and idealism. If they are emotionally secure, youngsters won't get carried away by the rhetoric of vested interests. The world will be at peace.'

'Amen', said all the others. 'You are a very wise young spirit, B! You have helped us decide what to pray for!'

4th February 2025

Responsibility.

The students listened spell-bound. Dr. Kartik Swami was a dynamic speaker. His background added to the impact of his words. Lots of cases of 'rags to riches' were known to all, but Dr. Kartik Swami was of a different level altogether.

Now, he smiled at the hundred and thirty graduates before him and said, 'before I conclude my talk, which you have listened to with such interest, I must tell you that everything you have learnt about success, and everything I have told you this evening, is of limited use unless you give importance to something that is not commonly spoken of by the Business School bigwigs – and that vital component to success in any field is called 'RESPONSIBILITY'.

Responsibility is something that is taken for granted. People in responsible positions accept it and shoulder it, because it has helped them get where they are. Mediocre people – and even very clever people – often fail to realize its importance. The importance of taking my responsibility seriously was hammered into me by my father and it is my belief that this is the actually secret of my success.

Responsibility is a habit that needs to be cultivated from the childhood, but very few children are taught this. The good news is that it is never too late to learn, though the older you get the harder it seems! It is like cycling – we keep falling off until we learn how to keep our balance effortlessly. Then, we sail through effortlessly.

The first stage is taught by our mother, when she tells us to brush our teeth, bathe, eat properly, say 'thank you' and 'sorry' and 'excuse me, please', etc. The class teacher is the next, making sure we come to school neatly dressed, sit quietly in class and do our homework. Then the games' teacher teaches us to be responsible for the position we have in the team. And, of course, the Business School teaches us about the responsibility of our position in the firm.

But responsibility doesn't end there. The things we've been taught are the specific areas of responsibilities. What I want to point out today to you is that each of us has a responsibility to ourselves, to our ideals and convictions, to our parents, wife and children, to our friends, our co-workers, our staff and our society and our country. We also have a responsibility towards the environment and the other species that are affected by our lifestyle and demands. We have a responsibility to the resources of the earth, and last, but not the least, to our forbearers who lived and worked and from whom we have inherited the culture and traditions that enrich our lives and make us who we are.

I am sure everybody present will have met people you automatically feel respect for, even if they are not high-ups in any area. Their personality evokes instinctive respect. They are people who have an innate sense of what is due to themselves and to others. They never bluster or seek attention. They are dignified and polite, reasonable in their demands and understanding of other people's difficulties. There is a pleasant expression on their face and a steadiness in their eyes. This is because they know that everybody has problems and that we are all struggling in some way for something.

There are also people who have a false sense of responsibility. I will give you just two examples. One are the parents who make excuses for their children's laziness – teaching the child to be irresponsible – and the others are the lawyers and psychologists who use medical science and legal loopholes to help a guilty person avoid punishment. They teach society to break the law and get off scot free. I term them as criminals of the highest order. And then, there are people who think it's very smart to make glib excuses to take their salary without doing the work they are paid to do.

You are all intelligent enough to fathom for yourselves that the majority of people are irresponsible. Their lives can be happy but

they rarely achieve anything worthwhile. They do much damage, but seldom realize that at the root of their problems is an attitude of holistic irresponsibility.

We neglect both at our own peril; nay, at the peril of everything we work and live for!

I wish you all a very good evening and thank you for this opportunity to share my thoughts and experiences to some extent.'

6th February, '25

Asset Management.

‘Oh! What a horrid day! Why did it have to rain today?’ grumbled Shalini.

‘I know!’ said Meena. ‘It’s just too bad! Just our luck!’

There was a murmur of agreement. The girls had come to a resort in the Sundarbans with their Teacher, on a three day visit. They hoped to see a tiger. Rain was not expected in October. They would lose one precious day out of three even if the weather cleared the next day.

‘So what do we do?’ asked Mayuri. ‘Play antakshi?’

‘Forget it! No one is in a mood to sing!’ snapped Shalini.

‘There are some magazines in the corner,’ said Miss. Bose. ‘You may find something interesting.’

The girls went over. ‘What’s Asset Management, Miss Bose?’ asked Priti.

‘Asset Management is investing wealth profitably,’ said Miss Bose.

‘Oh! That’s very well for the Adanis and the Ambanis!’ scoffed Meena. ‘People like us don’t have any assets to invest!’

Miss Bose smiled. ‘We all have assets,’ she said quietly. ‘Asset Management is generally understood to be investments of wealth, but it doesn’t end there.’

‘What do you mean, Miss Bose?’ asked Priti. ‘What assets do ordinary people like us have?’

‘Health, for one,’ replied Miss Bose. ‘Good brains for another.’

‘Oh!’ cried Shalini. ‘I see what you mean! Here, girls, let’s play a game – let’s make two teams – Miss Bose can be the Judge – and see

which team can think of assets a person can have, apart from money.'

Everybody's face lit up. This sounded fun. Shalini and Priti formed one team and Mayuri and Meena the other. They were well matched. Miss Bose sat at a table with a pad and took up a pen. 'Health and a good intellect have already been mentioned, so they will not be allowed by either team', she said.

They tossed a coin to decide who would lead. Mayuri's team won.

'Education,' said Meena. 'A good education is a great asset.'

'Family,' said Shalini. 'It's a great help to have a good family who is loving and supportive.'

'Friends,' Mayuri called out. 'A good friend makes all the difference.'

'Skills, like music or sports, or cooking,' said Priti. 'A skill is surely a great asset to have.'

Their words came loud and fast as the girls began to get a grip on the game.

'Judgement – it's a big help to be able to judge a situation.'

'Spare time – there's so much we can do in our spare time.'

'Eyes – what we do if we were blind?'

'Mouth!' cried Shalini, who was very fond of food. 'Our mouth enables us to eat and argue.'

'What about ears?' asked Mayuri. 'How can a deaf person go to school?'

'Hands are the greatest asset, I think!' stated Priti. 'Hands are needed for everything. We can't do anything without them!'

'Feet – we'd be stuck if we couldn't walk!'

'The heart – we couldn't live without it!'

‘Nor could we feel love, joy, sorrow, compassion etc!’

‘What about goal-setting? It’s a great asset to decide what we want and focus on our goals – both long term and short term. If there is no goal setting we don’t achieve anything.’

‘Self-discipline is a great asset that helps us to achieve our goals. No goal setting is enough unless backed by hard work.’

‘What about the ability to discipline staff, children, and others who work under us? The ability to discipline others tactfully is also a great asset, isn’t it?’

‘It is a great asset to avoid procrastination!’ said Priti. ‘I’m always being told I’ll never succeed in life unless I get over my habit to leave my work till the last minute.’

‘Disagreeing without giving offence is a great asset – look at Alka – she never starts quarrelling even if she says things we don’t agree with.’

‘I think it is equally important to be understanding. My Nani has this gift. We all love her because she is very understanding!’

‘Conversational skills are another great asset, don’t you think?’

‘I’d say a pleasant smile is the greatest asset – far more important than good looks. Everybody responds to a person who smiles.’

‘It is a great asset when a person is fair-minded. Nobody likes people who are unfair!’

‘It is also a great asset to have equanimity. I just can’t stand moody people!’

‘What about efficiency? Isn’t that a big asset?’

‘A sense of humour has to be the greatest asset! Life without humour is no fun!’

The lunch bell rang. The morning had passed fruitfully. The little game had made everyone so thoughtful that they forgot to ask Miss Bose who had won! They were too busy thinking of their own assets and how to manage them! In fact, Miss Bose – clever teacher that she was – had given them an important lesson in Life Management without their knowing it!

10th February, 2025.

A Letter from a Mother-in-Law.

My dear Priya,

You will be coming here just after your wedding and honeymoon. Your wedding is hardly a month away. I am very excited and I'm sure you'll also be feeling excited; perhaps, a bit nervous as well.

I have been thinking about the time when I was newly married. Of course, things were very different then. I'm glad you won't face any of the difficulties I – and others of my generation – faced when we were young brides, eager to become a part of the new family, often confused at what should be done and not done!

My dear, of the lessons I've learnt from life, one of the most important is that relationships between a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law become strained because each is apprehensive about the attitude of the other. So I decided I would write to you about how I feel and about what I expect from you.

I feel God is giving me a new daughter. My own daughters live far from Calcutta and are too busy in their own lives to bother much about me. I miss them, of course, and look forward to having you with me.

However, please don't think that I expect you to give me a lot of time or do chores for me or that I will impose my lifestyle on you! Luckily I have my own interests and keep myself quite busy. So, nor will I interfere in your activities or ask you to take me here and there, nor will I refuse if you want advise. I am not so old-fashioned that I will pass comments on what you wear, when you go to bed, when you get up, what you eat or anything else! Nor will I come and sit with you when you are busy or have friends over. It would be nice if we had at least one meal together, but please don't feel constrained to agree!

I have full faith in my son's judgement. Harish and I have always been close, and I know that the girl he has chosen to be his life partner will be humane, cultured, ethical and upright, apart from being intelligent and beautiful. That is why I was not surprised to see all this in you when we met last month. I held you close, and felt a little thrill when you hugged me back!

Priya, I believe that you and I will break the 'Myth of the Mother-in-Law'! We will set a new trend – 'Mother and daughter outlaws'! We will show the world that we can be as close as a mother and daughter, if not closer! If I do or say something that hurts you – or that you disagree with – I want you to tell me as frankly as you'd tell your mother. I would like to do the same, if I have your assurance that you will not take it as criticism. I would like us to be friends and depend on each other as a close-knit family does. Luckily I am fairly fit and will not become a burden on you. We will laugh together, cry together, fume together and plan together! We'll love each other – God willing!

Harish's father would have loved you like a daughter – he was always partial to girls and never regretted having three daughters and just one son. Thanks to his staunch impartiality, I never spoilt Harish the way many Indian mothers pamper and spoil an only son. You will find Harish has a deep respect for women and thank God, he doesn't expect them to cater to his wishes all the time!

I must warn you about one thing, though! Harish won't be bullied or cajoled into doing anything he doesn't feel is right! In that, he is just like his father. He will respect your ideals and he will want you to respect his – I'm sure you've learnt that by now, since you've been colleagues for more than two years. You will surely know by now that the one thing that infuriates him is when someone he loves sulks!

I also want you to explain to your parents and siblings that they will always be welcome in your home in Calcutta. We may not be very wealthy, but our hearts are warm, and they should never hesitate to come on a visit any time.

So, my dear, I don't know what more to say, without boring you. I am writing now, when you still have some time to read and think over what I've written, and come to your new home knowing it is your home in every way, and you have a mother here, too!

Already I feel I love you. I hope you will also love me, and that there will never be conflicts or misunderstandings between us, whoever else there may be misunderstandings with!

God bless my sweet children always. May you and Harish have a wonderful life together!

Your loving mother,

Shanta.

What do you think Priya felt when she received this letter? Would you write something like this to your daughter-in-law?

I can't understand.....

- Why the vocabulary of so many people seems so limited these days. If they like something, they say, 'awesome' or 'to die for'. It becomes tedious to hear just two expressions of appreciation!
- Why young women say, 'I swear' when they actually mean, 'I agree fully'. Is it necessary to take an oath to be believed?
- Young ladies say, 'don't tell me,' when they are avid to hear more juicy gossip – it sounds a bit contradictory! How would they feel if the other person took them at their word?
- 'FOMO' means, 'Fear Of Missing Out'. I'm told it's the latest catch phrase among youngsters. Fear of missing out on what? Gossip? Popularity? Information? Fun? Publicity?

I'm also told FOMO leads to young people wasting time and energy in activities they don't really enjoy, like Face book, Instagram, Whatsapp, etc. It takes up hours of their time and confuses their thinking.

Important things are neglected. There is no time left for enriching hobbies that promote mental health. No time to keep up with family or friends.....

Don't they every think about missing out on the really important things in life?

- Scientists and intellectuals and other thinkers pride themselves on logic and objective analysis. Is it scientific or logical to deny vehemently the existence of a higher power we call God, saying 'there's no proof He exists' when they cannot prove He doesn't exist!

The trend is to use a synonym like 'the Universe' or 'the Power', or even 'luck'!

Funnily, nobody seems to object to saying 'touch wood' as if wood has the power to drive away bad luck!!

How logical is that?

- Who do people like to take holidays that leave them so exhausted that it takes a couple of days' rest for them to get over their fatigue?
- In the USA, when we walk into a shop, the salesperson smiles and says, 'Hi! How're you doin'?' I am tempted to ask, 'how am I doing what?'
- It seems to be more and more popular to go to a restaurant and order fatty, unhealthy food along with a Diet Coke. Are they trying to diet or do they think a diet coke tastes better than a normal coke?
- Why is it that people seem to care more about their physical health than mental health?
- Why do people like to hear gossip and slander, but lose interest when you praise someone?
- People want dogs that are trained, children who are well-behaved, houses that are clean, food that is healthy and minds that are dirty.
- People give up their youth, health and relationships for their career and go into depression when they achieve worldly success because they've given up the most precious things for a mere illusion.
- Why people pass on hurtful gossip.

Red Riding Hood and the Wolf.

The Story of Red Riding Hood is as relevant as ever, if not more! In the 'good old days', children were warned against the visible dangers outside the home. Now, the dangers are even greater because they are invisible and insidious, and the children are equally vulnerable; maybe more!

It seems to me that the matter is likely to worsen, in spite of all the so-called development in security and safety. Forgive me if I'm being unduly pessimistic, but I grieve when I read the news and see how our youth – our future generations – have become the victim of modernisation and modern lifestyle.

Forgive me, also, if you are an avid admirer of Freud, but I feel he has a lot to answer for, because his insights have become simplified to an extent where parents and teachers don't dare to administer a much-needed smack in case they are accused of cruelty.

Result?

Undisciplined children who are free to misbehave and refuse to study.

Result?

Unhappy parents, frustrated teachers and mixed-up youngsters.

Add an unhealthy, unsavoury diet of promiscuous media and uncontrolled internet, the drug mafia and the glamorization of crime.

Does anybody think of where this can lead to?

Global issues like the Palestine-Israel conflict, the Ukraine-Russia war, political conflicts in Africa, and Asia, Global warming, air, water and sea pollution, melting of the Polar ice and new epidemics that nobody has a cure for.

Before the technology that made the world a village, people lived in communities that had their own moral and ethical codes. There was the fear of being ostracized if anybody broke the rules of appropriate behaviour. These social norms were gradually dismissed as outdated. Perhaps, but I believe many would prefer that they were still adhered to, because they ensured a modicum of decency and self-restraint. People believed in the eternal values like being honest and upright, having good manners, leading a life of discipline and amity, and having faith in goodness, compassion and charity, and respect for elders and authority.

All that is disappearing frighteningly fast. And, everybody is the loser. The mast of the boat of society is broken and society has become a rudderless vessel that cannot offer safety or security any more.

In earlier days, marriage vows meant a great deal. Commitments were not taken lightly; they were kept. Men and women felt it was their duty to do work in exchange of their salary and dishonesty was a shame, a burden no decent person wanted on his conscience.

Sadly, marriage seems to mean little or nothing now. Infants and toddlers shake with fear at the angry voices of quarrelling parents, often drunk. Anger leads to violence, and violence is becoming the norm in far too many places.

Is there any way an individual can make a difference?

I believe there is. I believe that the anger, violence, suspicion and fear that is pervading the world stems from the microcosm, the various individuals who feel it before it manifests. If we are prepared to stop wasting time on fleeting pleasures and make a serious effort to control our own reactions, it is sure to make our life less agitated.

After all, what do we all seek? Every being wants happiness, but we're confusing happiness with pleasure. We have to learn that

happiness is a state of mind, whereas pleasure is temporary and external.

We have to stop drugging our mind with palliatives like a movie or a match or a drink or a meal at a good restaurant. We have to discriminate between the things that give enduring happiness and the things that give an illusion – a temporary ‘feel good’ feeling. We have to understand that happiness lies in good relationships and sterling values, in hard work, honesty and understanding; in the generosity of giving, more than in taking, and in a tranquil mind instead of cheap thrills like the roller-coaster lives most people lead.

Now, back to Little Red Riding Hood! How can we prepare our children to avoid the ‘Big Bad Wolf’?

I am not a trained psychologist, but thank God I have some common sense. And, my common sense tells me that children learn by example, not by admonishing. My child won’t be polite unless I practice politeness. He won’t learn to be truthful unless he sees his parents avoid telling lies. He will be lazy and shirk his work unless he sees that his mother and father believe in honest labour.

I learnt these things because I saw my parents live them. They believed in God and daily prayers. They believed in charity and thrift. So, I also learnt these from them. They had few, but firm rules on discipline and I’ve found these very beneficial in bringing up my children. I could give my children a lot of love and company because I treasured it from my parents when I was a child. I said prayers with my children every night, unless I was out or travelling.

Once, my daughter asked me whether God hears our prayers. I told her He does. ‘Then why didn’t He give me what I asked for?’ she asked. I had to explain that God does what is best for us, but we can’t possibly know why He does what! Children come up with the most tricky questions, and I needed all my wits to give answers that satisfied them; particularly since I don’t know the answers myself!!

Later, my involvement in animal welfare taught me that the principles on which puppies are brought up are much the same. Lots of love, good healthy food, regular timings and firm discipline that is gentle and not overdone, some fun time and laughter, and the things that keep them from getting bored or getting tired out.

I have often been blamed for my simple principles, but nobody has explained how they are wrong. By God's Grace, my children are good human beings, fifty and over, and I have a lot to be grateful for. So much so, that the complaints I could make (like so many people do) seem so insignificant in comparison to the incalculable blessings life has given.

Before I conclude, I would like to mention something simple and very effective. A friend gave my grand-daughter (who has epilepsy) a diary and a ball-pen. She told my grand-daughter, 'This is a Gratitude Book. I want you to write in it whenever you feel happy about something.' This has made a tremendous difference to my grand-daughter's moods. She is much happier.

I wish every parent and every individual would start a 'Gratitude Book' and reflect on how they can be happier and spread happiness, because only a person who is happy can spread happiness!

My preferences.

- Rather an honest atheist than a hypocritical ‘man of God’.
- Rather a non-vegetarian who is a good human being than a vegetarian who is cunning and unscrupulous.
- Rather a simple friend with a good heart than a stylish, cultured companion with no sterling values.
- Rather the love and loyalty of a faithful dog than a hundred fair-weather friends.
- Rather a simple meal with someone who I love and respect than a lavish feast with social butterflies.
- Rather the naked truth than meaningless platitudes.
- Rather honest antagonism from a colleague than hypocritical flattery from a jealous co-worker.
- Rather a spouse who shares my values than the best-looking partner who has few morals.
- Rather a good walk in the open than a weary trudge in a shopping mall.
- Rather a hard day’s work than a day spent in idle speculation.
- Rather a job with a good boss at less pay than a highly paid job that eats into my conscience and self-respect.

Traps: Self-imposed and Social.

As we come into our late teens and early twenties there is a tendency to create a public image of ourselves that becomes a burden very often. That is fine, because we know instinctively that we need to fit in somewhere, feel needed, and wanted.

Some of the images I've noticed are a person who is always willing to help and cooperate. Another is of great efficiency, a perfectionist. A third is that of being stylish and well-groomed. Yet another is to show an aggressive attitude to make sure we're not bullied. Yet another is to play 'mother hen' and treat others as though they were under our care. There are people who project a 'poor me' image, wanting sympathy all the time! And maybe, the most irritating is when a person behaves as though others are imbeciles who need to be advised, guided and supervised all the time!

These are common and they go almost unnoticed unless they become unbearable. The person doesn't even realize why others resent them, and feel hurt if they are well-meaning. If they are naturally dominant, they feel indignant and become quarrelsome.

People who are always willing to help can also become a nuisance, because most people are glad to be helped when they needed it, but prefer to manage by themselves as far as possible. If they become dependent on help, it harms both the giver and the receiver in the long run, because the one who helps starts feeling indispensable and begins to bully the one he/she helps. The one who is helped does not like to be bullied and tolerates it until the built up resentment boils over. Both feel unhappy.

A person who projects an image of being a perfectionist is often laughed at by others. Sooner or later the perfectionist slips and then not only does he/she feel angry with themselves, they also hate being mocked by those they had looked down on.

The stylish and well-groomed image is also difficult to live up to. In the ordinary way, it matters little if the dress, hair, nails, make-up etc are not perfect; in fact, they seldom are, in most busy people. Nobody pays much attention if the dress is not well-starched or well-ironed. However, for a person who makes a fad of being perfectly groomed, it becomes a minor tragedy if their hair is slightly overgrown or the dress gets wet in a sudden shower! They become greatly agitated and feel greatly ashamed. Others may admire their impeccable appearance, but it is human nature to feel a little envious and people generally rejoice to see the normally beautiful turned out person look as bad or worse than them!

People who are aggressive get aggression – that is the normal human reaction; and applies to other species as well! It is self-defeating. An aggressive person may get obedience but never cooperation. He becomes friendless and lonely and then, very bitter, not realizing why people don't like him.

The 'mother hen' type is mostly women, typically a bit short and plump and motherly. They are caring and affectionate and easily hurt, because most adults resent being mothered once they are adult. Adults who like being mothered are mostly weak-minded, incompetent men who have been spoilt rotten by their mothers and have become grownup babies. They cling to the mother hen and become a burden and nuisance!

The 'poor me' kind are often the 'iron hand in a velvet glove'. In the beginning people get taken in by them, but they soon see the selfish and often ruthless person behind the soft exterior and don't like what they see.

The worst kind is the petty dictator who makes his/her colleagues and family feel that he/she considers everybody else a fool – a feeling not at all conducive to cordiality and good-will!

These few types I have given as examples are there in almost every family and group. It is only when the tendencies become overbearing that others react.

Perhaps the reader will find my observations rather harsh, but I am sure everyone who reads this will find people they know who fit into these types, and feel amused. The purpose is not to criticize, but to be alert and save ourselves from either developing any of these traits if we have them, or recognizing them in others and not falling prey to the dangers of being pushed into an unpleasant reaction.

Harmony is an essential ingredient for tranquillity, and tranquillity is essential for happiness and success. We all want both! God knows, there is enough violence and ill-will in the world. We need to use every possible method that enables us to co-exist amicably. If we can nip the cause of friction in the bud, we'll all be the happier for it.

An Unusual Chat.

Ravi Merchant settled in his window seat and tightened his seat belt as instructed. He smiled slightly at the Monk sitting next to him, wondering what they could have in common. Like most successful executives in IT, Ravi was not at all interested in religion, but he was a friendly person who liked to hear the views of people from a cross section of society.

After they had settled and finished their breakfast, Ravi asked the Monk, 'do you live in Dubai?'

'No. I am going at the invitation of a Swaminarain bhakta to do the puja for his new house.'

'I'm afraid I'm not really interested in religion,' Ravi said with some diffidence. 'It seems to be full of tedious rituals.'

'I can understand,' said the Monk with a smile. 'That is because the rituals seem like a meaningless waste of time, isn't it?'

'Yes!' said Ravi, pleased to see that he had not offended the Monk. 'That's it, exactly! Even if God is there, what is the use of spending even fifteen minutes in lighting a lamp and incense and offering flowers, etc?'

'May I offer my opinion, provided you don't take it personally?' asked the Monk.

'Oh, please! I'd like to know what you think,' said Ravi.

'You see, it's like this. Bhagwan doesn't seem real to us because we can't experience Him with our senses. Science can neither prove nor disprove him. The modern lifestyle is too hectic to study the ancient books or listen to spiritual discourses. Modern education focuses on material success and everything else takes second place.'

'I agree completely!'

‘Like you, most people feel that doing puja, or doing japa, is hypocrisy if you do it without having faith.’

‘Go on!’

‘But tell me, how does one get faith?’

‘I honestly don’t know! How did you get faith and become a Monk?’ asked Ravi.

‘You won’t believe this, but like you, didn’t have faith either, when I was a child. The faith and piety of my mother and father did have a subconscious impact, though, and one day I went with them to listen to a discourse by a Swami – I forget his name – who spoke with such conviction and logic that I began to get interested. After that I began to read the works of Swami Vivekananda. Then I was convinced that I am missing out on the most important thing of my existence. I decided to become a Monk and find my spiritual goal.’

‘This is most interesting,’ said Ravi, fascinated. ‘And did you find it?’

‘Yes and no,’ said the Monk with a smile. ‘I have not attained full understanding or enlightenment, or get the darshan of Bhagwan; but I have found peace and I know I am on the right path. I am profoundly thankful that I chose this path; especially when I see how troubled people are. If nothing else, I can contribute to offering comfort to others and keep a worthwhile tradition continuing.’

‘Why do you call it a worthwhile tradition?’ asked Ravi.

‘Why not? What other tradition is there, which provides free counselling and inspires faith in goodness?’

‘How does puja do that?’

‘Our Vedic philosophy is also applied psychology, you know,’ said the Monk. ‘When a person begins to do puja, he is gaining strength in the things that the Ishwara stands for. The Brahman has no form and no attributes; it is non-dual. So it manifests in an Avatar like Rama or

Krishna. To meditate on a form is much easier than meditating on the formless.'

'Yes, that is true. I tried to meditate and gave up!' said Ravi.

'When you do puja, your mind becomes focused on the actions you do. Your subconscious develops faith that you are doing something to show reverence to the Almighty, who is loving, forgiving, and all powerful. It is like a child whose parents are away, but he knows they're there, and he can depend on them to protect and provide and guide and comfort.'

'I never thought of it like that.....' said Ravi slowly, thinking about this new angle about an activity he'd dismissed as useless.

'All right, I accept the logic. May I ask you about something that has often bothered me?'

'Certainly,' said the Monk. 'Please feel free to ask whatever you wish to. Be assured I will neither be shocked nor angry!'

'Why do we have this caste system in Hinduism? It seems so wrong!'

'It has been made wrong by vested interests,' said the Monk sadly. 'The ancient system merely stated a fact and provided for people of all natures to have employment in which they could be comfortable and flourish.'

'Can you explain this?' asked Ravi.

'Yes, of course. Anywhere you go, in any country, at any point in history and every community, you will find that people are of four basic types. There are highly intellectual people who are scientists, professors, researchers etc. Then there are the strong-man type, soldiers, wrestlers, boxers, policemen etc. The third type is the people with commercial acumen, like bankers, traders, business tycoons, etc. And then there are the simple-minded folk who like to lead a simple life of hard work, good pay and simple pleasures.'

The first group were called the Brahmins. They studied and preserved the ancient knowledge and guided people about what is right and what is wrong. The second type, called the Kshatriyas, became the rulers who took guidance from the Brahmins. The third type was called the Vaishyas because they ensured the economic stability and smooth availability of all the commodities society needed. The fourth group were called the Shudras because their aptitude was for hard work that needed no specialised training or learning.

These four groups are present in every society. The caste system actually exists in every country in the world, but is defined only in India. What Karl Marx said about power corrupting is very true. The people in power tend to tyrannise whoever they can, and this also happened in our country. The politicians came onto the scene and incited groups against each other. They highlighted the word Shudra to make the labour class feel insulted, and nobody pointed out forcefully enough, that the Vedas describe the universe as the Virat Purusha whose head is the Brahmins, arms are the Kshatriyas, stomach is the Vaishya class, and feet are the Shudras. No part is lowly or redundant; all parts of the body have their own importance.'

The air hostess was making an announcement to tighten seatbelts and put the chairs upright and fold the tables, because they were approaching Dubai and were about to land.

'Thank you very much, Sir,' said Ravi. 'It has been very rewarding to listen to you. I am deeply impressed by what you have told me. Thank you again! Can I help with your hand baggage? Is someone meeting you at Dubai airport?'

'Yes, I am being met. I am glad you found food for thought in what I had to say. I hope you develop faith in the Almighty. Nothing else gives us strength and comfort in times of stress and trouble, and these come to us all; but we can deal with it better if we have faith.'